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Democratic Republic of the Congo

15 July 2025 | POPULATIONS AT RISK



RISK LEVEL: CURRENT CRISIS

Various armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo recurrently and indiscriminately attack civilian populations, committing violations that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

BACKGROUND:

Attacks by armed groups and recurring inter-communal violence have threatened populations in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) for more than 30 years. More than 120 militias and armed groups actively operate in Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu and Tanganyika provinces, many of whom regularly perpetrate widespread violations and abuses against civilians that may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes. The UN Security Council (UNSC)-mandated Panel of Experts (PoE) has documented some armed groups allegedly executing, torturing and arbitrarily detaining civilians perceived as collaborators of enemy groups. While combating armed groups, the government's armed forces (FARDC) and police have also been implicated in violations of International Human Rights Law (IHRL) and International Humanitarian Law

(IHL), including sexual violence, torture and arbitrary killings, some of which may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Despite offensives conducted by the FARDC, supported by the UN peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO), violence has escalated in the eastern provinces for several years amidst a surge in attacks by groups like the March 23 Movement (M23), Allied Democratic Forces, Cooperative for the Development of Congo and the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, among others. Since 2021, when M23 re-emerged after nearly a decade of dormancy, the group has perpetrated widespread attacks across North Kivu – and more recently, South Kivu – amid intensifying clashes with the FARDC and the government-backed abusive militia known as Wazalendo. All parties to the conflict have perpetrated IHL violations, including indiscriminate shelling, killings, sexual violence and forced displacement. The UNSC-mandated PoE has documented **evidence** of the Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) providing support to M23, with at least 3,000-4,000 soldiers fighting alongside M23.

Ongoing armed group activity has resulted in a marked increase in conflict-related sexual violence and grave violations against children. Recurrent clashes and insecurity have resulted in a displacement crisis, with over 7.8 million people internally displaced. Armed groups regularly perpetrate attacks against displacement sites, killing hundreds of civilians and causing further displacement.

The International Criminal Court has been investigating serious crimes in the DRC since 2004. In 2023 the DRC government requested an investigation into alleged crimes in North Kivu since January 2022. The Chief Prosecutor launched a preliminary examination in June 2023 and, in October 2024, renewed investigative efforts.

In 2023 the Congolese government requested MONUSCO's accelerated withdrawal by the end of 2024. MONUSCO withdrew from South Kivu in June 2024 under the agreed disengagement plan. However, deteriorating security in North Kivu and Ituri, the two remaining provinces with MONUSCO presence, prompted the UN and Congolese authorities to reassess the exit strategy. On 20 December 2024 the UNSC renewed MONUSCO's mandate for another year.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

At the start of 2025 M23 – reinforced by troops and equipment from the RDF – intensified its offensive in North and South Kivu, seizing the provincial capitals and consolidating control over the mineral-rich region. According to the DRC government, over 7,000 people have been killed since January. The clashes have been characterized by serious human rights violations and abuses, including summary executions and conflict-related sexual violence. Over half a million people have been forced to flee, with displacement sites targeted by heavy artillery, and widespread looting and indiscriminate attacks on shelters, water, sanitation and health facilities.

In response to the deteriorating situation, on 7 February the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution urgently establishing a **Fact-Finding Mission (FFM)** and a subsequent Commission of Inquiry on the serious human rights violations and abuses and violations of IHL committed in North Kivu and South Kivu provinces since January 2022. This was followed by the UNSC adopting a resolution on 21 February, which demands the immediate cessation of military advances by M23 and reiterates the call for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire.

Throughout February and March international pressure on M23 and Rwanda increased, with the United States (US) imposing sanctions and the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany restricting or suspending bilateral financial aid and development cooperation with Rwanda. On 27 June the **DRC and Rwanda signed** a US-brokered peace agreement, committing to cease hostilities, respect territorial integrity and end support for non-state armed groups. Separate negotiations mediated by Qatar between the DRC government and M23 are expected.

ANALYSIS:

For decades, various armed groups have exploited the absence or weakness of state authority in eastern DRC to perpetrate attacks against civilians. Rampant impunity and competition for control of profitable minerals have enabled the proliferation of such groups. Ethnically motivated and deliberate attacks against displaced Congolese have led to waves of secondary displacement while sexual violence continues to be used as a weapon of war. Widespread armed group activity has impeded MONUSCO's ability to protect civilians and conduct life-saving operations, leaving populations vulnerable.

The resurgence of M23, a group with a history of perpetrating widespread abuses and war crimes against civilians, has exacerbated regional tensions and contributed to the

militarization of mining sites. Amid ongoing clashes between the FARDC and Rwanda-backed M23, **hate speech and discrimination has surged**, heightening grievances and the risk of further atrocities and a broader, regional conflict. The government risks complicity in crimes perpetrated by FARDC-aligned ethnic militias that have abusive records.

A military solution will not resolve the political, social and economic drivers of the conflicts in the eastern provinces, including the illegal exploitation of natural resources and ethnically motivated attacks. The US-mediated peace deal offers a rare diplomatic opening in a region scarred by decades of armed conflict and mass atrocities, but it lacks key commitments to justice, accountability and redress – elements essential to breaking the entrenched cycle of violence and impunity. In parallel with the ceasefire agreement, a proposed US-brokered critical minerals deal risks replicating extractive dynamics that have fueled conflict in eastern DRC.

RISK ASSESSMENT:

- Indiscriminate use of heavy artillery, shelling and bombings near civilian areas, as well as threats posed by unexploded ordnance.
- Persistent threat of regional instability despite peace agreement due to M23's exclusion, as well as strained diplomatic relations between Kinshasa and Kigali.
- Alarming levels of conflict-related sexual violence, disproportionately impacting displaced women and girls.
- Unprecedented scale of children recruitment and use by myriad armed actors.
- Existing security vacuum exacerbated by FARDC deployment to fight M23 and MONUSCO withdrawal from South Kivu, emboldening other armed groups to remobilize and target civilians.

NECESSARY ACTION:

All forces operating in the DRC must prioritize the protection of civilians and compliance with IHL and IHRL while addressing the ongoing threats posed by armed groups. The FARDC should implement a vetting process to identify and provisionally remove individuals who may have been implicated in serious human rights violations, as well as cease the use of abusive militias as proxy forces. The FARDC and police should thoroughly investigate and publicly report on any violations by their forces.

Rwanda should end its military support for M23 and respect the territorial integrity of the DRC. All parties to the conflict must adhere to obligations under international law and rigorously comply with the peace agreement.

The international community should suspend military assistance to governments found supporting armed groups and ensure that any support, financial or otherwise, does not fuel human rights violations. Neighboring states should ensure that forces active in the DRC refrain from illicit activities.

Any forthcoming mineral trade arrangement must prioritize human rights, civilian protection and environmental safeguards, as well as strengthen supply chain due diligence and ensure equitable benefit-sharing.

The FFM should provide a comprehensive assessment of ongoing atrocity crimes and coordinate with the Team of International Experts on the DRC, the PoE and the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes region. Its work should draw upon existing findings and promote measures to ensure accountability.